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Reader's Guide

from Rick Barot
 author of *Chord*

Author Asks:

1. To begin with the title. How does the book's title, *Chord*, relate to the poems in the book? What are the connotations and associations in the word chord that are illustrated in the book? And what are the specific poems that do so?
2. I wrote the poems in the book over a fairly long period—about eight years. I wrote “Looking at the Romans” about halfway through that period, and I considered it the title poem for the manuscript in the period afterwards. Of course, I eventually went with *Chord* for the title. From your standpoint, what would have made “Looking at the Romans” a compelling title poem for the book?
3. “Tarp” is the first poem in the book but the last poem I wrote for the book. After I wrote it, I knew immediately that I wanted it to be the book's first poem. What are the themes in the poem that the later poems develop? And what do you think a book's opening poem should do for a book as a whole?
4. *Chord* is my third book, and in all of my books there have been poems that engage with visual art. My relationship to art as a source of aesthetic intensity and social/political utterance has changed quite a bit over time. What are the poems in the book that seem to be about my “relationship to art,” and how is that relationship rendered from poem to poem?
5. The title poem of the book is an elegy for my grandmother Consorcia, who died in 2005, at 92 years old. She was a schoolteacher for 47 years in the Philippines before retiring and coming to the United States. In your understanding of the poetic genre of elegy, do you think “Chord” aligns with or is in conflict with that understanding of what elegies are supposed to do?
6. The poems in *Chord* were written during a period of much political and social unrest in the United States and in the world—post 9/11, the Iraq war, Obama's election. How does the political manifest itself in the book? What are the specific poems that seem to be political?
7. The book is divided into three sections. How are the three sections distinct from each other? If you were to choose a “title poem” for each section, a poem that captured the themes and concerns of that particular section, what would those poems be?
8. One of my obsessions as a poet—perhaps this is an obsession of all poets—is a constant gathering and seeking of imagery and metaphor. My poems, therefore, are often just occasions to use some of the imagery I've collected and the metaphors I've generated from that imagery. What are some of your favorite images and metaphors in the book?
9. In terms of structure, “Exegesis in Wartime” is one of the more unusual poems in the book. What are the thematic strands being explored in this poem, and how does the structure highlight those strands? Do you think this structure works?

10. In the last few poems of the book, there's a distinct thematic shift. How would you characterize this shift? Do you think this shift works for the book or not?

Writing Exercises:

One Sentence

Because I'm a teacher of writing, I sometimes catch myself saying grandly irresponsible things like: "If you don't care about how syntax works, or how syntax works in your writing, you're never going to be a good writer." Which is only to say that I think syntax is a crucial thing for a writer. In my own writing, I'm always challenging myself to create sentence constructions—from the most simple to the most ornate—that dramatize the content and meaning of each poem I'm writing. One of the most challenging poems in the book for me to write was "Syntax," because I gave myself the task of writing a poem that was one long continuous sentence, even if I knew that the grammar would get funky along the way. So here's the prompt: write a poem that's one continuous sentence. Don't cheat by using semi-colons!

Inventory

Another feature of poetry that I'm deeply invested in is imagery. I go around collecting images all the time—usually cool, interesting imagery. In the last few years, however, I've also been training myself to look at the things surrounding the particular image that initially sparked my interest. That is, I'm trying to hold myself accountable for the world-context that informs the beautiful thing that I'm looking at—a world-context that is often far from beautiful. The prompt is this: read my poem "Inventory" and write your own inventory poem.

Further Reading:

1. Deborah Digges, *Rough Music*
2. Andrew Feld, *Citizen*
3. Rigoberto Gonzalez, *Unpeopled Eden*
4. Jorie Graham, *Place*
5. Cate Marvin, *Oracle*
6. Susan Mitchell, *Rapture*
7. Arthur Sze, *The Ginkgo Light*
8. Robyn Schiff, *Revolver*
9. Susan Stewart, *The Forest*
10. Brian Teare, *Companion Grasses*

